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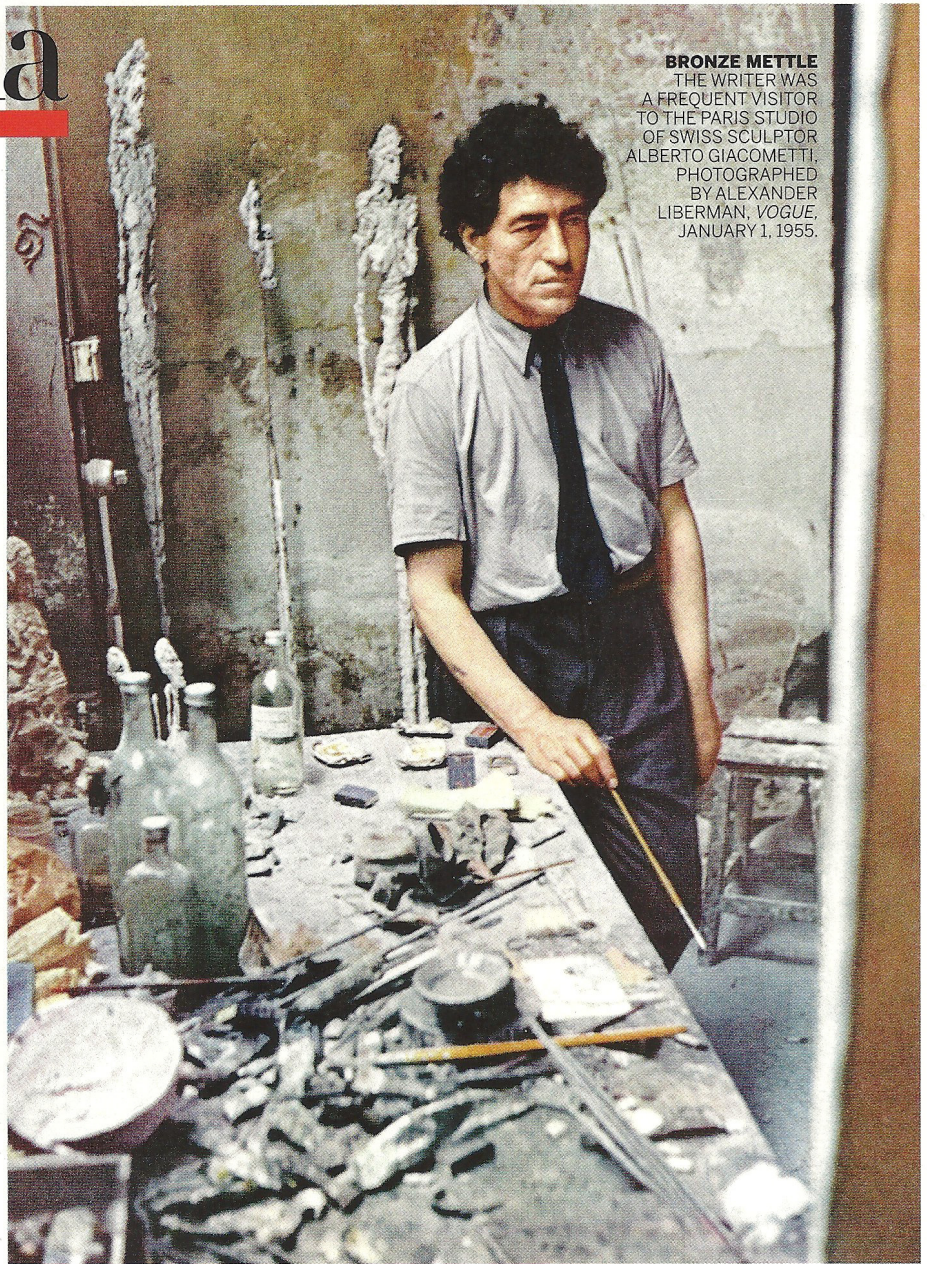
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BRONZE METTLE
THE WRITER WAS
A FREQUENT VISITOR
TO THE PARIS STUDIO
OF SWISS SCULPTOR
ALBERTO GIACOMETTI.
PHOTOGRAPHED
BY ALEXANDER
LIBERMAN, *VOGUE*,
JANUARY 1, 1955.



W

hen I was in my mid-20s, I painted a portrait of a friend who, as payment, invited me on a three-week trip to Paris. On the eve of my departure, I met a few friends at the Cedar Tavern on University Place, a watering hole for the Abstract Expressionist crowd in 1950s New York, where I was pursuing a career as an artist. Some of us were cliché starving artists, who supported one another as best we could. In my Greenwich Village walk-up (toilet in the hall, bathtub next to the kitchen sink), I painted on the floor, not by choice à la Jackson Pollock, but for lack of a table. The painter Al Held and sculptor Ronnie Bladen worked at the Door Store and, upon hearing of my predicament, carried a wooden door up four flights of stairs and plopped it on top of the bathtub. From then on, I could work at a more comfortable height. While I was saying my farewells, Bill de Kooning invited me to have a drink with him at the bar. When I mentioned my upcoming journey, Bill said, “As soon as you return, call me and we will get together for dinner.”

We never did have that dinner, because I would cash in my round-trip Air France ticket and stay in Paris for the next 40-some years. There, I discovered the equivalent of the Cedar Tavern: Le Select café on Boulevard du Montparnasse. Le Select did not discriminate in its patrons—wealthy dilettantes, established artists and writers, and perhaps most of all, the penniless emerging artists hoping to brush shoulders with and find inspiration from the few local celebrities. Le Select had its regulars, whose eccentricities were well known to one another. It was common for Beauford Delaney, the American expat artist who painted James Baldwin’s portrait, to make himself completely at home at a table not his own, reaching for someone else’s half-finished drink and swallowing it in one gulp. Once he took the petals of a bouquet of anemones lying on a sidewalk table and, much to everyone’s amusement, started gobbling them up. Another frequent

CAFE SOCIETY

At Le Select in 1950s Paris, **Amaranth Ehrenhalt** befriended sculptor Alberto Giacometti, who gave her a gift—and an even more valuable lesson.

visitor was the dark-eyed, dark-haired Yves Klein, sturdy from his intense study of judo, who would apply paint to nude women and have them lean against his canvases. The café was a meeting place, a starting-off point for evenings—there I would meet painters Pegeen Guggenheim and Ralph Rumney before dinner at Wadja around the corner or a gathering at Michel Mendès France’s apartment. The walls of his avant-garde space were covered in *nostalgia* >498

graffiti, and Michel would leave markers or paint out for guests to add new designs and messages. Once he said to me, while handing over a small collage with torn pieces of a franc note, "It may be hard to make money out of art, but it is easy to make art out of money."

Ever conscious of my small savings, I taught English to people I'd meet at Le Select and sold little sketches and watercolors in the cafés, something one can do only while very young. There was little extra for new clothes, so everything came from flea markets or secondhand stores. Once, I picked up a pair of heavy-duty blue-and-white striped worker's pants and a jacket at a flea market, which I wore when I painted. They shrank after several Laundromat washings, and eventually I offered them to Joan Mitchell, who was a few sizes smaller than I and took them without hesitation. Another time, at the Salvation Army, which was designed by Le Corbusier, I ran into the husband of the woman who owned the atelier where I was working on a lithograph. I was embarrassed to tell him why I was there—I think I said I was hunting for old dishes, which truthfully was something I had done before.

It was not until one afternoon with Alberto Giacometti that I set foot in a department store. I would sometimes see Alberto at Le Select. By the time we met, he was already quite famous for his sculptures. His hair was thinning in the front, gray and curly in the back, waving in the wind. His strong jaw and dramatic features made him intriguingly handsome, with muscled arms and strong, capable hands.

He would place those hands on my high cheekbones, observing the contours of my face. He would swivel my head a little to the right and to the left, looking at my profile and talking about my bone structure, almost as if he regarded me as a living sculpture. One chilly afternoon, Alberto asked me to accompany him on errands. He hailed a taxi and gave the driver an address. We stopped in front of a very chic department store, the name of which I no longer remember, through which he ran frantically as if intent on finding something in particular. I trailed him until we stopped at a counter with a display of gorgeous shawls in the loveliest fabrics, thick with long, fine fringe. He selected a black Mongolian cashmere shawl, placing it behind my neck and wrapping it around my shoulders, arranging the exquisite wool fabric to his aesthetic vision. The shawl seemed to frame my head, separating it from my body. Before I knew it, he had paid for it and said, "Let's go to a café." Over the plats du jour, I asked him what I was supposed to do with the luxurious accessory. He told me it was a gift to keep and enjoy. I offered to do something for him in exchange, such as translate letters, clean his tools, or sweep his studio floor, knowing from previous visits how messy it was.

I had been there many times. From Rue Hippolyte-Maindron, one precariously descended the wooden stairs into a tiny, dimly lit ground-floor work space, even though he could



have afforded a larger and more comfortable one. The damp air was tinged with the odor of stale cigarettes. There were sketches, tools, and brushes crowding the place, unfinished sculptures on armatures, half-done paintings in many shades of gray, which were surprisingly luminous. In his deep voice, he would invite visitors to relax on a rough wooden box littered with junk and extinguished cigarettes—you had to clear it to sit down. A layer of gray dust covered everything. Such was the state of his studio that you were tempted to don a neglected sculptor's apron and a pair of gloves, and set to work with a sponge and a bottle of bleach. The state of disorder scarcely changed from one day to the next, but after a few visits, I discovered subtle differences—progress on a sculpture that I had thought abandoned, new forms sketched on a cabinet or upon the walls. Whenever I visited, Alberto greeted me in his usual uniform of a blue cotton shirt missing a button or two, plaster and paint stains dotting his sleeves and shirtfront. Our conversations were very casual, about everyday things like current shows and exhibitions, the lack of talent and dedication in many of the younger artists, our own work and careers. He was a private man, and so we rarely discussed our personal lives in detail. We usually ended our visits with his saying, "One of these days you should come and pose for me," which unfortunately I never did.

Now, across the café table, he looked directly at me, the lovely shawl draping my shoulders, and said, "*Si on fait un échange, ça ne sera plus un cadeau.*" ("If we make an exchange, it will no longer be a gift.") I wore the treasured mantle for years, reminding me of our friendship. Then one day, at a party, it disappeared. Whoever might have taken my beautiful black shawl will never know how precious it was to me. Only after it was gone did I realize it was not so much the object itself that was the gift, as how Alberto taught me to accept one. □

YOUNG AT ART
THE WRITER WAS
PHOTOGRAPHED BY
FRIEND VAL TELBERG
IN NEW YORK CITY,
CIRCA 1952.